

Atrocity both requires and resists representation. The argument that we must bear witness to atrocity, that we must tell the stories, is the core of the catechism of the human rights movement. We gather testimony, we investigate and detail war crimes, because we are morally bound to do so. Our obligation is acutely urgent in cases where legal prosecution is a realistic possibility, but it is also powerful long after the call for trials has faded into history—especially when there is a robust practice of denial and historical revision, as there is in Japan. We are creating a collective moral archive of our time for future generations. We are making public history intelligible to survivors who have seen their deepest personal truths denied daily. And sometimes, as the soldiers I spoke to believed, we are using the safe-to-imagine past as a way of making visible what we are doing in the present.

In recent decades, Japanese government officials, scholars, and former military officers of all ranks have denied and downplayed the atrocities committed by Imperial Japan. In 1994, Minister of Justice Shigeto Nagano described the 1937 Nanking Massacre—in which an estimated 300,000 civilians were murdered—as a “fabrication.” In the carefully worded apology that followed, he continually referred to the “Nanking Incident.” In 2007, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe denied that Korean women were coerced into becoming military sex slaves. In 2001, the Ministry of Education approved for use a revisionist school history textbook that glossed over war crimes, including the Nanking Massacre, the widespread use of sex slaves, and experimentation with germ warfare on Chinese civilians. In 2005, a book by a Japanese scholar was translated into English (and personally sent to me by the publisher) that lambasted the late author Iris Chang for perpetuating “the myth of a massacre’s having been perpetrated in Nanking.” The list could go on. If Elie Wiesel is right in saying that to forget is to kill twice, then the Second Sino- Japanese War never ended. It just shifted to the landscape of memory.

So all of us—the photographer, the interpreter, and I—began this project with the same assumption: bearing witness to atrocity, in this case and in general, is a good unto itself. Whether it’s telling the story of the crime as it’s happening or collecting and sharing the testimony years later as we were doing, the struggle for human rights and the battle of memory requires a single clear moral position: either speak out or be silent, either resist or be complicit.

I am not so sure anymore.